

TURKMENISTAN

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Capital: Ashgabat
GDP per capita: \$537
Population: 4,800,000

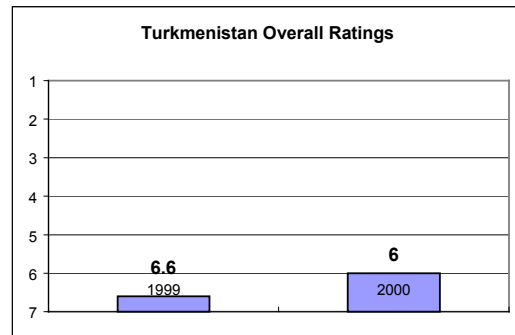
Inflation: 20%
Unemployment: n/a
Foreign Direct Investment: \$100,000,000

OVERALL RATING: 6.0

The NGO sector in Turkmenistan continues to be the weakest in the former Soviet Union. According to the database kept by the Counterpart Consortium, there are approximately 200 registered NGOs and unregistered “initiative groups” in Turkmenistan at present. Since registration is the major problem for local NGOs, many work on an unregistered basis. The national government remains largely unsupportive and often times hostile towards NGOs, viewing them as a threat to order and stability in the country. There is no evidence that any NGOs have been able to register as “public organizations” during the past two years, although 10 organizations were able to register as commercial structures in the past year. This reflects the government’s broad suspicion of the NGO sector. For the first time in three years, the Ministry of Justice began to provide written explanations for refusing NGOs registration. This acknowledgment of the right of a group to know why its registration was refused may be interpreted as a small step towards transparency. However, most observers believe that the government will continue to reject applications until a new law on public organizations is adopted, which is not anticipated to happen soon.

The only organizations officially recognized and actively supported by the government are quasi-governmental NGOs, such as the Union of Women, the Union of Veterans, the Union of Youth, and the Trade Union. Environmental NGOs are probably the strongest in Turkmenistan. Historically, they were the first to agitate for government accountability in the mid- to late-1980s. While based among intellectuals and disproportionately Russian in ethnicity, many ecological groups have become more involved in grassroots work within communities in recent years. In addition, environmental activism attracts some participation from government officials, both former and active. Social NGOs and groups working with disabled people are also active. Civil society also represents a vibrant arena for women’s participation. Approximately 80 to 90% of Turkmenistani NGOs are led by women, and a great number of NGOs and initiative groups are comprised of female staffs. Many of the program activities of these groups target women and their specific needs.

In some cases, NGOs are willing to advocate for their constituencies’ needs. However, the political environment precludes political lobbying or advocacy at the national level. Furthermore, NGOs have not been allowed to participate in the process of drafting new NGO legislation.



NGOs continue to be financially dependent on international donors. Since 1997, however, there has been a marked differentiation of international funding sources for Turkmenistani NGOs. Whereas in 1997, only one organization provided grant assistance, there are now 10. Meanwhile, the inability to register prevents NGOs from undertaking any official activities, including fund raising and income generation activities. In this respect, technical assistance provided by donors and through intermediary support organizations is very important. Questions remain, however, as to whether Turkmen NGOs will be able to mature and grow in the absence of government recognition and registration.

Most NGOs in the country remain small and have very small membership bases, limited community outreach, and poor networking and coalition-building skills. As a result, the NGO sector is still marginal in Turkmenistani society. In addition, most NGOs continue to be run by strong personalities rather than through decentralized and democratic structures of organizational governance. While this may assist NGOs in formulating and adhering to clear and cohesive strategies, it also limits the ability of NGOs to take the next step towards becoming truly sustainable organizations based on a stable and active membership and/or constituency.

LEGAL ENVIRONMENT: 6.5

The legal environment for NGOs in Turkmenistan is probably the worst in the former Soviet Union. Although the formal legal regime and tax code can be construed as being favorable for the existence of civil society groups on paper, in reality, the law is not implemented at all, and there are serious impediments constraining NGO development. NGOs continue to be harassed by the government and cannot freely criticize local or national governments. Many initiative groups are active and continue to operate without registration, however. They do so at the pleasure of the local or national government, and thus their activities represent ad hoc favoritism from individual government officials rather than the legitimate exercise of the right to exist.

As mentioned above, 10 organizations registered in the past year as commercial structures. As such, they gained legal status and the right to exist, but do not enjoy any of the privileges that NGOs in Turkmenistan receive.

NGOs lack knowledge of relevant legislation and their legal rights. There are no lawyers in the country who specialize in civil society issues, though some consultations may be provided by the Ministry of Justice to registered NGOs or by a few lawyers' groups.

Although NGOs officially enjoy some tax benefits, there have been cases when taxes on grants were allegedly levied. Taxes are used as a tool for limiting and/or halting the operations

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of particular organizations. The inability to register affects the NGO sector's abil-

ity to generate income legally.

ORGANIZATIONAL CAPACITY: 5.8

Constituency building efforts remain weak in Turkmenistan. Most often, NGOs build their mission statements and strategies around donor organizations' requirements. Only a few organizations have membership fees and democratic structures.

A scarcity of donors and a lack of local funding impede the development of organizational capacity. As many donors work only with registered NGOs, unregistered initiative groups are limited in their ability to ensure appropriate staff-

ing, management structures, and advanced technical capacity. Only about half of NGOs possess the organizational management capacity, institutional structures, and physical and institutional equipment needed in order to operate effectively.

A generalized lack of funding encourages NGOs to seek support from volunteers. Volunteerism seems to have increased over the past year; however it is still not institutionalized.

FINANCIAL VIABILITY: 6.0

With the exception of quasi-organizations, most NGOs remain entirely dependent upon grants from international donors. The limited availability of grants induces a competitive, rather than cooperative, intra-sectoral dynamic. On the positive side, the growth of the international donor base for Turkmen NGOs has the potential to increase capacity within the NGO sector to manage grant projects.

Depending upon the scope of activities and missions of NGOs, local governments or the business community may provide in-kind donations to organizations, such as free rent. However, this type of social partnership is not system-

atic, and is susceptible to the vagaries of local political authorities and the universally weak economy.

Despite these difficult circumstances, some organizations, especially outside of the capital where donors are not present, continue to exist without donor support. This is particularly true for organizations representing environmental interests and the interests of marginalized groups.

NGOs need more training programs to develop and maintain sound financial mechanisms, and they will not be able to achieve financial sustainability until the registration problem is solved.

ADVOCACY: 6.3

Advocacy is practically non-existent in Turkmenistan, as it can be politically and physically dangerous to advocate vigorously for changes in the country. The ability of Turkmen NGOs to advocate varies by the issue, and is practically limited to a narrow range of community-based needs such as those expressed by marginalized groups of invalids, consumer rights groups, or water users' associations. The government tolerates no truly political or legislative lobbying. Even environmental organizations, which are the strongest in the country, have little opportunity to lobby the government, either nationally or locally, due to the repressive attitude towards NGOs. However, in certain cases

when an NGO's efforts have coincided with the government's agenda – environmental curriculum reform and AIDS awareness are two examples – joint activities have taken place.

The lack of unifying ideas and experiences, as well as strong competition for limited donor funds, results in the unwillingness of NGOs to create and maintain coalitions. A nascent association of environmental NGOs was created in the summer of 2000 with the support of the Ministry of Natural Protection. It remains unclear, however, whether it will prove strong and representative enough to play an active role in promoting its members' interests.

SERVICE PROVISION: 5.3

Despite a general weakness in constituency building efforts, NGOs in Turkmenistan have witnessed some improvement in service provision over the past year. Services provided include those to marginalized groups, such as disabled people. NGO services are limited because only registered NGOs are officially permitted to provide services. It should be noted, though, that many unregistered NGOs provide assistance to their constituents, for example re-

training services for unemployed women. The government does not recognize NGOs as a valuable tool in helping to solve social problems in the country, and its support is usually constrained to a few quasi-organizations. Despite ongoing problems, some organizations, like the Water Users' Association, effectively work with local communities to identify their needs and provide services accordingly.

INFRASTRUCTURE: 5.7

It was noted by a sampling of Turkmen NGOs that there has been some improvement over the past year in terms of infrastructure. This is due to an increase in the number of Intermediary Support Organizations and NGO Support or Resource Centers. Such centers provide invaluable support to NGOs and initiative groups by sharing information and offering training programs and technical

assistance. However, due to the problems discussed previously, they are solely dependent on international donors, as they are unable of generating income through fee-for-service schemes or from local sources. It is extremely important to sustain such centers, especially because of their information dissemination services. No governmental organizations are willing to disclose in

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formation to NGOs. Intersectoral partnerships are not sufficiently developed. Existing NGO networks are limited to

information sharing activities and are not capable of implementing advocacy campaigns.

PUBLIC IMAGE: 6.2

The public in Turkmenistan remains extremely indifferent, but not negative, towards the NGO sector. The absence of non-state media in the country means that media coverage of NGOs is limited to sporadic publications in newspapers and television reports, all of which reflect the perspective of the government. Most of the population has never heard of NGOs or has incorrect information about them. Nevertheless, the term “NGO” has gone from being an unknown phrase to a term used frequently by government officials in newspaper articles and television interviews. With few exceptions, neither the business community nor the government consider

non-governmental organizations as an important community resource or a source of expertise. NGOs have made little effort to become more transparent by sharing information about themselves, for fear of divulging such information to the government and law enforcement authorities. Registered NGOs must submit reports to the Ministry of Justice, a practice that appears to be another method of controlling NGOs in the country. Unless the government’s negative and aggressive stance towards NGOs changes, it is hardly possible to anticipate that the sector’s public image will improve.